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Zelenko, Aleksandr Ustinovich

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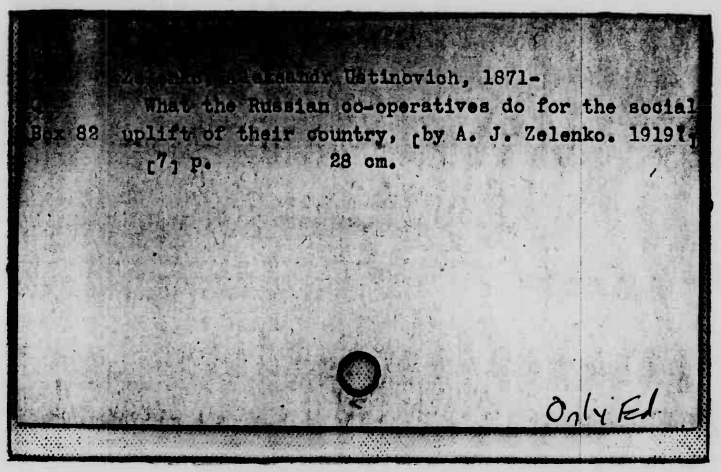

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What the Russian Co-operatives Do for the Social Uplift of Their Country

3 June 1920 Dnd

By A. J. Zelenko.

To a traveler entering a Russian village the first sight is the church, built of stone or wood, but always painted white, with green or deep blue cupolas, the school house and the store, and then row upon row of low, wooden farm huts.

To whom does the store belong? In nine cases out of ten it is a Co-operative store, for there are no less than fifty thousand such stores spread over the country. It is not sumptuous in appearance, for it is low, dark, of unpainted logs, and contains no fancy dry goods, no beautifully finished shoes with French heels, no show windows or glass cases—but everything which the ordinary peasant farmer needs and likes. There are clothing, dress materials, shoes, canned goods, hardware, notions, tobacco, candies, farmers' supplies and books.

It is significant that books are found in this village grocery store, for those books are printed by the Co-operatives.

The peasants say, "That is *our* store," and it is no wonder that the store is a sort of club-house. In the morning farmers, on their way to the cities, stop to purchase something for the trip; in the afternoon boys and girls, returning from school, laugh and chat over new books, or some cheap ornament to attract the girls; in the evening the housewives gather, and groups of somewhat sinister old men, with long hair and beards, appear in homespun overcoats and heavy boots. Now and then the schoolmaster drops in for school supplies, or the clergyman to see the people, for usually both of these village notables are members of the local Co-operative Board. Their politicians spin their small village meshes, radicals throw their heated arguments, conservatives grumble about young soldiers who have brought home so many new ideas from the War front, and new propositions for social up-lift are met, discussed and planned.

These people are accustomed to obtain every needed supply from their store. The villager and the industrial worker ask the Co-operative Unions to procure everything needed in their daily life. Probably the coffin alone is still made by intervaluistic enterprise—all other needs of human life are supplied by the "potrebelovka," or "all consumers' market." If an article is not sent by the Wholesale Union, the people grumblingly demand the reason, and the Wholesale Center explains. If the Wholesale Center is not active enough, or charges too much or too little, a printed explanation in the newspapers or magazines is requested. If some radical be dissatisfied with the spirit of progress in his own village, he sends a strongly worded protest to the local Co-operative magazine. If the storekeeper attempts to cheat the villager, or his returns show poor profits, or even losses, the people look to the Wholesale Center for help, so that constantly written and printed communications are the channels of keeping alive interest in the village life.

The big city paper is too expensive, and is written in language unintelligible to the peasant mind. It often uses such foreign words as "constitution," "resolution," "solution," and other similar alien words ending in "tion." It too often discusses difficulties and petty disagreements between various political parties. The working people not only like to be informed of big problems, but they also want to gain suggestions for cultivation of their fields, better sales of crops, better treatment and care of horses and cattle, none of which is contained in the city paper. It is only in the Co-operative press that they find these aids—and this press is no small affair, for there are no less than fifty newspapers and two hundred magazines printed by the Co-operative Unions.

But the Co-operatives understand that they can get desired growth of the movement only by giving full value to the people. They realize that the sooner the hearty support and social understanding of the people is gained, the better will be the results, and with this end in view they employ quite an army of instructors, lecturers, auditors, bookkeepers and managers to travel through the country.

There are no less than five hundred Wholesale Unions in Russia, and each has its staff of traveling lecturers, bookkeepers, managers and experts in agricultural and various kinds of local industries, who are constantly going into the country to visit the different societies in their districts. Altogether there are about five thousand such instructors who are engaged in managing this part of the Co-operatives' plan of business control.

The result is that while there have been failures of small Co-operative societies, there has never been a failure of a Union. Even in the past year, a time when Russia was involved in civil war on five fronts, and at great disadvantage in railway traffic, the Co-operatives were still able to produce an output of over one and a half billion dollars.

The instructors are not satisfied with their contracts and publications, but they are also trying to introduce more intensive social and educational training among their groups. If a local society decides to start a village library, the members ask the District Wholesale Union to send the material, and the latter in turn addresses the Central Whole-

sale Union which prints its own books, or buys whole editions direct from private firms. Not less than a hundred thousand books and ten million pamphlets have been printed by the Unions during this last year to be resold in the small Co-operative societies.

It is very interesting to see the collection of books in the supply-house of a provincial center. A retail book store, connected with such a supply-house, carries the best progressive books of all kinds. On entering such a store one will often find there an old peasant, a delegate from his society, who has come to buy a collection of books costing from one hundred to three thousand rubles. He looks with hope into the face of the young sales-girl, telling her that she knows better than anyone what kind of books should go into his collection, and that he thinks besides agricultural books, it would be very nice to have some about God, though he doubts whether the young folk in the village will like them. Then there is the school teacher making a collection for his school children, a young bookkeeper from the village store, and the chairman of the theatrical club, which is made up of young Co-operators, looking for some interesting social drama. A sturdy, thrifty chairman of a local society, who has come into the city as a delegate to the meeting of the Wholesale Union, has dropped in on his way home to purchase the new forms of bookkeeping about which he has been instructed by the central office of his Union. All of these books have been standardized and published by the Central Management so that it is possible to gather statistics for general use. These book stores play an important part even in the life of the cities, where no less than ten million dollars' worth of books were sold last year. Many pamphlets describing the Co-operative Movement, popular books of the Movement in England, France, Belgium and the Scandinavian countries, have been published for propaganda purposes, but I am sorry to say that as yet nothing has been written in the Russian language about the American Co-operative Movement. The Central bookstore of the All-Russian Central Union of Consumers' Societies carries about two thousand titles, out of which there are approximately four hundred on foreign Co-operation and other educational subjects.

The Union of Siberian Co-operative Unions "Zakoopsbyt," has undertaken to print for the Siberian local self-government or "Zemstvos," school books worth one million, two hundred thousand rubles.

Besides the books I have previously mentioned, the All-Russian Central Union of Consumers' Societies has written the following: "Rules for a Village Educational Circle," "List of Readings with Lantern Slides for People's Houses," "Children's Playgrounds," "Children's Literature for Kindergartens," "How to Organize a Community Chorus," and "Children's Kitchen Gardens."

The instructors try to satisfy the needs of all generations. The older folk gain information regarding agriculture, boot-making, honey-making and the lumber industry. The young people are supplied with material for their literary, social and theatrical clubs. Sometimes the Unions keep special instructors who go into the villages to show the people how to start their dramatic ventures. The Wholesale Center keeps on hand a large stock of theatrical paraphernalia, ranging from scenery and costumes to wigs and other make-up, which they sell or rent at a nominal charge. In remote parts of Russia I have found office workers preparing such paraphernalia. The Central office has even gone so far as to employ a professional theatrical group to tour the country and give entertainments. Sometimes I have seen performances given in small villages where old, richly colored Russian shawls were used as the only scenery—quite in the Gordon Craig style. It is an exciting event in the life of a young peasant boy or girl to find himself transformed to represent a foreign courtier, an old Russian knight or boyar, a banker or a merchant. This transformation and experience inspire strange new feelings which enrich their young lives and show the possibilities of becoming more in real life than poor peasants or farmers like their grandparents.

The plays produced are, for the most part, of very good social and cultural value, and with the aid of the instructors the best classical works are introduced.

The older folk often protest against all these "extravagances" brought by the younger generation, but are finally persuaded that theatrical performances were used by the Church in Mediaeval times, and are slowly being won over. Some of the most persistent opposers go so far as to visit these entertainments, insisting that they be allowed free admission in order to act as censors. Having gained an entrance they often pretend that they have already paid their Society fees, or do not care to partake of the refreshments for which the admittance charge is made. In reality they often drink more tea than any other visitors.

Very good guide books for the Peoples' Theatre are written by the Co-operative instructors, and the best dramas and comedies are published in very inexpensive form for from five to fifteen cents apiece.

In very many villages the Russian Co-operatives have established what are called "people's houses," similar to what are known here in this country as "social" or "community centers." The idea was first put into effect on a small scale in a roadhouse, where tea was served to travelers and villagers who dropped in to chat and thus had a certain social meeting-place. The Co-operatives then opened tea-houses under their own management, taking great care that these were made real social centers. They are ever watchful that these places are kept clean and the atmosphere made attractive and congenial. There newspapers are kept, meetings called, and now and then a lecture arranged.

When the war broke out and the Russian Central Government prohibited the sale of liquors, many houses run by the liquor dealers were taken over by the Co-operatives, and thus the problem of transforming saloons into clubhouses, of which there is now talk in America, was practically solved in Russia as long as five years ago. I think that no less than three or four thousand teahouses are already in operation in Russia. The All-Russian Central Union of Consumers' Societies, in trying to standardize and systematize the work, has published a book giving descriptions and plans of these houses, including an outline of their regular system of bookkeeping.

As I have already said, there are many small libraries run by the Co-operatives and when such a library is joined to a teahouse, a hall for meetings and theatrical performances is assured, and soon a regular social center established. Such a social center is managed by a committee of local Co-operative Unions. Separate committees are appointed to have charge of chorus drilling, orchestra practice, agricultural courses, lectures on various social subjects, juvenile clubs or kindergarten. A remarkable and typical arrangement for a Co-operative commonwealth center consists of a store which is connected with the teahouse, a room for the village bank where the local credit society has its office, another little room where the Board may hold its meetings and very often a storehouse for agricultural machinery. The same All-Russian Central Union also printed a book which has already passed its fourth edition, entitled "How to Build and Control People's Houses."

The traveling lecturer very often carries lantern slides with him, or even more often, a projectoscope for illustrated performances. I think no less than four hundred such moving picture outfits are owned by the Co-operatives. The Central Unions have begun to establish their own shops in order to produce films showing the usefulness and advantages of the Co-operative Movement. When an instructor arrives in the village with his lantern and pictures, an army of village boys run through the streets, wildly announcing at every house, "The City Uncle has arrived, and will show us some new pictures!" Gradually the school house, the social center, or the library building as the case may be, is filled to overflowing. After crossing himself upon entering, everyone greets his neighbor with a hearty, "Good evening, people!" Children are everywhere, and those who have been unable to crowd inside the building, press their little noses against the window panes in order to see the pictures. The instructor lectures while showing his pictures of agricultural or geographical interests, light comedy, or studies of Co-operative activities and progress which the people in the village have not as yet attained, and thus a feeling of competition is aroused in the community. When the performance is over, everyone realizes that his face is moist from perspiration. The lantern finally begins to darken because of the damp air, and the lecturer is then invited into an adjoining room to partake of a half dozen or more glasses of tea and to talk with the Co-operative chiefs. If the lecturer knows the people, and can express himself to them in their own simple village language, he is able to grasp at once the relative strength of the conservative and progressive elements of the village Co-operative, and can understand just how much progress he can make at one time, and what he will have to hammer most during his next visit. Thus the contact between the officers and privates of this big Co-operative army is formed. New leaders are constantly being developed, and faithfulness to the cause in time of stress or failure is inspired in the young workers.

The future generation needs more help—they must be better than their fathers, and receive more education along Co-operative lines; and with this purpose in mind the Unions have established extension courses throughout the country. They gather the people who have already passed the primary schools for short courses during the Winter and Spring. Each society picks candidates from its membership and sends them to the city where they are supplied with books, board, clothing and en-

tertainment. The ideals of the Commonwealth are developed before their eyes. They work conscientiously during the day on their arithmetic and bookkeeping problems, and the theory, practice and history of the Co-operative Movement. In the evening after the day's work is finished, they sing all the beautiful old Russian songs in chorus to their hearts' content. By the end of the course they are all old friends and promise to write one another in the hope of meeting again the following Christmas to talk over their experiences and adventures in the villages. In this way a wider acquaintance is gained, as well as a different horizon and broader view. Thus the nucleus of an intelligent class in the villages, or "peasant intellectuals" as they would be called in Russia, is formed.

Some of the better educated will go into the cities to become bookkeepers and take special bookkeeping courses, and the most ambitious may even go to universities, for already in five or six different localities special courses in Co-operative Science have been established—some in institutions organized for the purpose, and others affiliated with the universities. At the unique Co-operative institution at Moscow the first known degree of "Doctor of Co-operative Science" is conferred upon graduates.

Russia needs leaders true to Co-operative ideals, and sufficiently educated to meet the already huge sized army of Co-operatives in the country, where no less than twenty million members have joined the Co-operative Movement.

The entire educational activities of the Co-operatives may be divided as follows:

1. Extension courses for the young folk in the country.

2. Summer courses to prepare instructors and lecturers.

3. Short Winter courses for the village bookkeepers.

4. Regular University courses for higher Co-operative training.

5. Peasant Universities. (There are already five or six peasant universities established throughout the country along the lines of the Danish University which peasants may attend during the Winter months, and receive instruction in agriculture, farming, home economics and civics. One of the Unions in the Government of Nijni-Novgorod conducts a special peasant university to prepare leaders for official service in the local municipal governments).

6. Co-operative Elementary and High Schools. (There is a new movement on foot to establish new types of elementary and high schools for children where the whole system is based upon Co-operative principles. I found in the small town of Mariynsk, in Siberia, a wonderful school of the intermediate type which had been established by the local Union. In this school the bookkeeping of the establishment is taken care of by the pupils, and they run a magazine on the Co-operative share-holders' scheme. The discipline of the entire school is maintained on the self-government principle, and the system of training in languages, mathematics, history and geography is based upon the Co-operative idea. They also conduct a Co-operative savings' bank. The school is co-educational, and the children have not only conducted their business successfully, but have included in their working plan the children of all other city schools which are run by the local municipality. In the cities of Charkoff and Chita are other high schools which are run on the same Co-operative basis. Many other Unions have begun to follow the new plan of education which should be introduced in regular municipal schools).

From this short sketch it may be seen that the cultural life of Russia is now supported mainly through the Co-operatives because they not only control to a great extent the productive, consumptive and credit activities of the Russian peasants, industrial workers, small officials in State activities and city folk, but also because they pay so much attention to the social uplift of their people. The twenty million members do not include all that are reached, for behind each member is his family, which in Russia is usually composed of at least four or five members, so that a population of not less than one hundred million is influenced by the Co-operative Movement. Every day some new activity spreads its network in response to a crying need.

During the war period, the Co-operatives undertook to act as a helping hand to invalids and cripples of the war. The bulk of the Russian Army was composed of peasant boys accustomed to heavy work requiring great muscular effort. The people in the villages are trained to do very little outside of farm work, and in order not to take the invalids away from their village surroundings and throw them unhappily among the city folk, the Co-operatives have arranged a series of courses for storekeepers, bookkeepers, auditors and supervisors in the various Co-operative enterprises. During all this time the Co-operatives have taken charge of the clothing, feeding and housing of thousands of these war victims.

The Co-operatives have recently introduced a system of mutual insurance which will slowly, but steadily, bring into the hands of the Co-operative Unions the money which is now being earned by

private insurance companies. They insure their immense real estate holdings and factory goods, and have begun to insure the property of the members.

You may ask where the Co-operative obtains money enough to carry on all this work? First of all, they try to have everything they do based upon business and economic principles in order to receive return from their efforts; and second, they understand that money must be expended in order to develop the growth of the Co-operative Movement.

As a consequence, a certain percentage of each year's profits from the different societies is turned over to social and educational activities. Not only do they spend millions of dollars in paying expenses of courses, theatricals, moving pictures, special Co-operative schools and colleges, but they find it possible to give aid to the local government when taxes run low, or assist poor school teachers or district physicians who are working for the time being without compensation.

No less than fifty thousand workers are employed in the factories and industrial enterprises of the Russian Co-operative Unions. There are various flour, paper, soap, silk, and lumber mills, chemical and dye works, refrigerating plants, canneries, fisheries of the North Sea, the Black Sea and the Pacific Ocean, raisin-grape vineyards, tar industries which are greatly developed in the northern regions, and creameries throughout North Russia and Siberia —all of which could be valued in the aggregate at not less than two billion rubles. At very large wholesale plants, where workers pack and send the goods to provincial Unions, two hundred million rubles' worth of coffee, tea, rice, canned goods, hardware and machinery, is handled annually by an army of workers.

It can be seen by this short statistical data that the Co-operative Unions employ labor on a very large scale; and as the Unions are run by Co-operative capital, the people themselves are the real proprietors of these industrial enterprises.

There must be a certain social understanding established between the employers and the employees, which will give satisfactory labor conditions to the employee, and bring sufficient profit to the employer who is the small share holder. The policy of the Unions toward labor in their own industries has proved very progressive and efficient. This efficiency has been gained not only through the aid of mechanical devices and efficient administration, but also through the attitude of labor toward production. For this purpose the Co-operative Unions have established a separate labor department to look after the welfare of the employees, and bring about conscientious relationship between labor and the administration. As a result, the Co-operative Unions cannot pay low wages, cannot have long hours or use sweatshop methods.

Collective bargaining has been introduced in most large enterprises, whereby employees are engaged and discharged through a committee composed of representatives of the administration and labor unions, who regulate working conditions, wages and reasons for discharge of employees. Furthermore the labor department endeavors to introduce everywhere possible kindergartens for the children of working women, libraries and clubs for the workers, as well as to arrange choruses and festivals from time to time. They have also encouraged medical benefits, insurance schemes, vacation periods, etc., and are trying in every way possible to improve living conditions by establishing local consumers' societies and building associations among their workers.

It is very interesting to observe the change of attitude of the workers in a factory previously controlled by private ownership, and purchased by Co-operative Unions. How incredulous and suspicious they are at first of the kind words of the new management! They slowly begin to appreciate their own rights and their relationship to the new commonwealth proprietors. Sometimes they try to cheat the administration as they did the old management, but gradualy through the committees on labor and arbitration, they begin to understand their rights to discuss common needs, and to realize that the administration does not intend to interfere with, but heartily approves of social welfare work of the employees. Thus a better spirit and better standards of work are gained.

The Co-operatives certainly are not yet doing enough along these lines, but should do a great deal more and spend still more money in developing this work. There is the double process of showing the small Co-operative shareholder (the proprietor in this case), who is often too ignorant and short-sighted to understand that profits should be cut a trifle in order to foster general social progress, and of educating the peasant and industrial worker to understand the mutual interest in his own life and at the same time gain that rapidity of work which is demanded by the most critical members of the Movement.

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